

An aerial photograph of Washington, D.C., showing the Potomac River in the foreground and the South Capitol Gateway area. The image is semi-transparent, allowing the text to be overlaid. The South Capitol Gateway area is highlighted with a semi-transparent blue overlay.

II. Historical Background

The South Capitol Gateway and Corridor Improvement Study is grounded in Washington D.C.'s urban, political, and cultural history. Inspiring urban design precedents and sobering lessons learned from past mistakes form the foundations of this effort.



Thomas Jefferson's sketch of the Federal City, c. 1791

The city of Washington in the District of Columbia was founded in 1791 to serve as the capital of the recently formed United States of America. The Founding Fathers were not only experts in politics and government; they were also knowledgeable builders. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, and Alexander Hamilton all had strong ideas about the appropriate urban and architectural character of the Federal City. After framing the civil structure of the United States, they created a capital from which the new nation could govern.

The Founders were acquainted with and influenced by European cities, from ancient Athens to modern London, Paris, and Rome. They also drew upon their first-hand knowledge of Boston, Annapolis, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Richmond. The Federal City had to fit within the framework established by these colonial settlements. But unlike them, it would—like the U.S. Constitution—be an entirely new and distinctly American synthesis of political ideals expressed in urban form.

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—both surveyors and amateur architects—were instrumental in the Federal City's design. Washington personally selected its site at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. Jefferson's preliminary drawing of the city demonstrates his interest in articulating the Constitution's balance of powers by locating the Capitol and the President's House in equally prominent locations near a grand open space. The Founding Fathers' ideas contributed significantly to the efforts of Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the French architect and engineer hired to develop the plan.

II. Historical Background



Pierre Charles L'Enfant's Plan for the Federal City, 1791

L'Enfant's plan combines the grid street system typical of American cities superimposed with a network of broad avenues radiating from the Capitol, the President's House, and other ceremonial public locations. L'Enfant's ingenious juxtaposition of narrow, perpendicular streets with wide, diagonal thoroughfares created open spaces both large and small for public buildings and parks.



Thomas Circle c. 1890



Farragut Square c. 1875



Rendering of Washington from across the Anacostia River, c. 1850



New York Avenue lined with trees and streetcar tracks in the center, c. 1945

Washington quickly became punctuated with public circles and squares, and its streets planted with rows of closely spaced deciduous trees. Washington was so famous for its lush green canopy that it became known as the “City of Trees.” These shaded thoroughfares carried pedestrians, horse-drawn vehicles, and by the end of the 19th century, electric streetcars.

Washington’s gracious, tree-lined avenues were named for the original thirteen states. Radiating from the Capitol, for example, were avenues named for Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Naming the city’s most important streets after prominent states was shrewd both politically and urbanistically. The former colonies had misgivings about surrendering their autonomy to this fledgling nation. Their inclusion in Washington’s grand plan suggests their critical role as partners with the other states in what was considered little more than a democratic experiment.

The U.S. Capitol, placed on Jenkins Hill at the highest point in the city, represents the nucleus of the L’Enfant Plan. From it, three 130-foot wide boulevards—North, South, and East Capitol Streets—and a large parade ground to the west divided the city into four quadrants. South Capitol Street was initially the most prominent of these thoroughfares, since it served as the primary entrance to the city for those arriving by boat.

Within decades of the District of Columbia’s founding, South Capitol Street became the urban backbone of the city’s industrial section. Although Boston, New York, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were America’s manufacturing and commercial centers during the 19th century, Washington contained dozens of ship building companies and other manufacturing enterprises along its waterfront. Many of these supported the Washington Navy Yard, which was the city’s largest employer during the 19th century.



View of Washington industrial sections in southeast and southwest from 2nd Street SE, 1860s

The industrial character of South Capitol Street and its surroundings was firmly established by the outbreak of the Civil War 1861. Much of the munitions that supplied the Union Army were either manufactured or processed there. South Capitol Street and the adjacent quadrants became home to thousands of immigrants and former slaves who flocked to Washington to work in the factories there.

South Capitol Street's potential as the city's ceremonial gateway was eclipsed in the 1880s when an elevated railroad track was built over it along the alignment of Virginia Avenue. By the end of the 19th century, much of the Founding Fathers' intentions for Washington's ceremonial center had been lost. This was most apparent west of the U.S. Capitol, where L'Enfant's parade ground had been replaced with a series of picturesque gardens designed in the 1850s by A.J. Downing. The train tracks built over South Capitol Street terminated at a train station built by the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad at the foot of Capitol Hill.



View of southeast Washington down 10th Street, c. 1860



Central Washington with U.S. Capitol in the background, c. 1900



Aerial Perspective of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. by the McMillan Commission, 1901



Plan for Washington's Monumental Core by the McMillan Commission, 1901

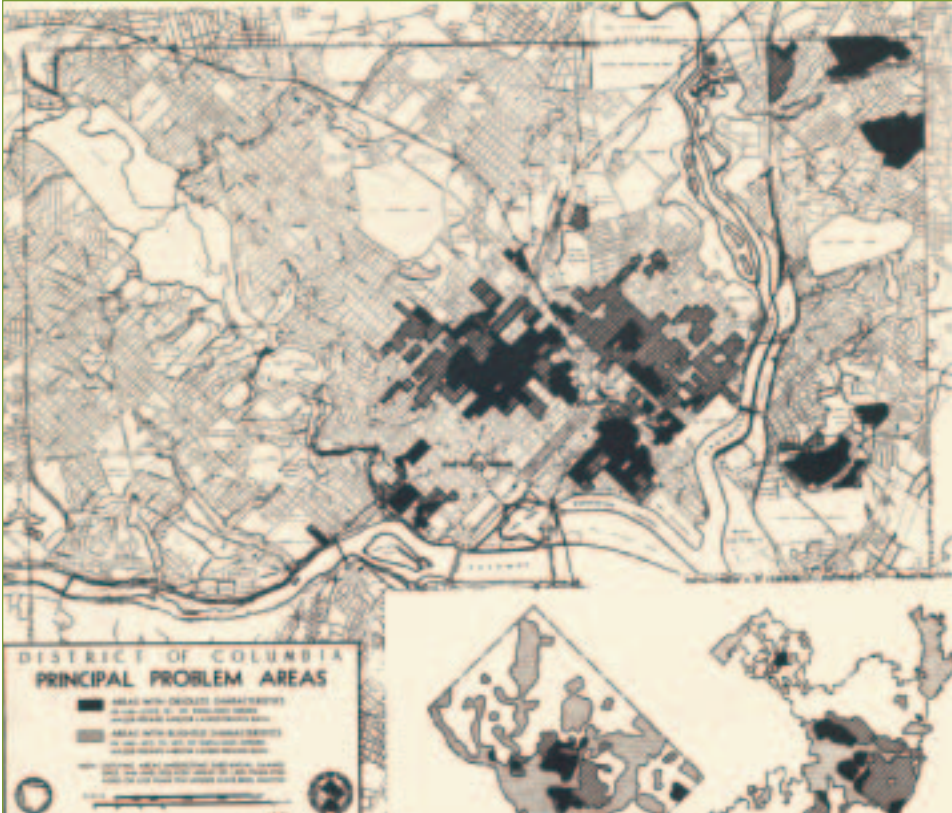


Proposed Park System as part of the McMillan Commission, 1901

The annual meeting of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), held in Washington in 1900, focused much of the new organization's energies on the capital city's urban state of affairs. Although the United States had recently stormed onto the world stage with its victory in the Spanish-American War, its capital city did not look at all like an international center of democracy. President Theodore Roosevelt's rough rider persona had catapulted him into American politics. However, he was not inclined to govern from a city that resembled a frontier outpost.

The AIA's efforts and the support of the Roosevelt Administration led to the creation of the Senate Park Commission chaired by Michigan Senator James McMillan. Chicago architect Daniel Burnham became the lead designer on the project. He was joined by some of the most talented artisans of the day, including architect Charles Follen McKim, sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

After an extensive European study trip, the McMillan Commission produced the plan that created modern Washington's Monumental Core. McKim and his colleagues reinstated the L'Enfant Plan as the city's primary framework. L'Enfant's original parade ground was rejuvenated, clarified, and expanded. Its extension to the west included a memorial to Abraham Lincoln and a bridge over the Potomac River to Virginia, symbolizing the unity between North and South forged by the Great Emancipator. The McMillan Commission also proposed making Washington's Monumental Core just one element in an extensive park system including thousands of acres from Rock Creek Park to the banks of the Anacostia River.



District of Columbia Principal Problem Areas, National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 1950

Over the next fifty years, the McMillan Plan reshaped Washington’s Monumental Core. This included moving the railroad terminal off the Mall and building Union Station just north of the Capitol on Massachusetts Avenue. During this time, several other structures were constructed along the National Mall, including the Lincoln Memorial (completed in 1920) and the National Gallery of Art (completed in 1941).

Although the McMillan Commission rejuvenated Washington’s Monumental Core, it did not consider any of the city’s neighborhoods. By the time the United States emerged victorious from World War II in 1945, the well-established residential communities surrounding the National Mall had thrived for over a century. However, their aging buildings and outdated infrastructure drew intense scrutiny from the planners of the day. By 1950, almost all of these neighborhoods—including those adjoining South Capitol Street—were declared blighted and earmarked for massive intervention.



SE/SW Freeway at the former intersection of 2nd and F Streets SW



2nd and F Streets SW c. 1950

The years following World War II marked the beginning of the city's decline. The period's distaste for old buildings, the desegregation of its public schools, and the tidy new houses in suburban Maryland and Virginia prompted residents to leave Washington by the thousands.



Independence Avenue and 7th Street SW today



Independence Avenue & 7th Street SW c. 1940

This mass migration to the suburbs coincided with the destruction of entire neighborhoods bulldozed in the name of urban renewal. In southwest Washington alone, over 300 acres of houses, streets, and parks were razed.

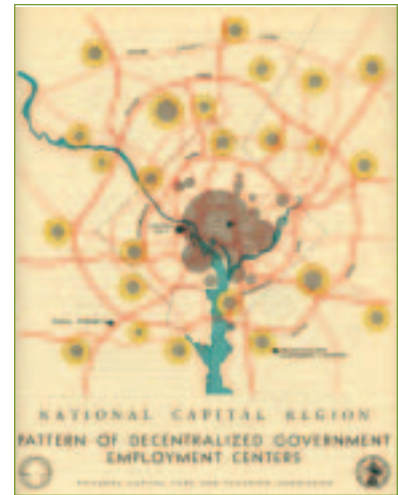
As whole neighborhoods disappeared, so did their trees. Present-day Washington bears little resemblance to its nineteenth century namesake "City of Trees." The widespread loss of trees from demolition, attrition, disease, and neglect has made the city's current street network appear even more barren.



Thoroughfare Plan for the District of Columbia, 1955

As Washington transformed from a place to live to a job center, massive highway construction projects were proposed to alleviate the postwar explosion of vehicular traffic. In 1955, in anticipation of the Defense Highways Act of 1956, the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia Highway Departments proposed constructing a 450-mile expressway system for the Washington Metropolitan Region. This included an Inner Loop within the District of Columbia linked to two suburban beltways by five elevated highways radiating from the U.S. Capitol.

The Inner Loop's South Leg (now called the Southeast-Southwest Freeway) was built in the mid-1960s where whole city blocks in the Southwest and Capitol Hill neighborhoods had recently been cleared. Like the train tracks built over South Capitol Street 100 years earlier, the elevated freeway followed the Virginia Avenue alignment, creating the current tangle of overpasses in the shadow of the Capitol dome.



1955 employment center plan



View of South Capitol Street today from Eye Street SW



8th Street SE just beyond Southeast freeway



Potomac Avenue SE west of the 11th Street Bridge

The massive destruction and human displacement caused by the freeway's construction prompted city residents to wage an all-out battle against more elevated roadways. After nearly two decades of fierce public outcry, the highway departments scrapped their highway plans. Washington's first elected mayor, Walter Washington, announced in 1976 that the District of Columbia government would apply the federal funds earmarked for the Inner Loop toward the construction of the Metrorail system.

Although much of Washington was spared the devastation that would have resulted from constructing the Inner Loop, the damage to South Capitol Street and its adjacent neighborhoods had already been done. The few remaining fragments of working-class, industrial Washington near South Capitol Street are poignant reminders of the communities that once teemed with workers and their families, both black and white.



Corner of 7th and L Streets SE

South Capitol Street's gritty physical appearance, its present role as a commuter thoroughfare, and its stagnation over the past half century collectively encapsulate the District of Columbia's most pressing problems. Because South Capitol Street looks and performs like a freeway, most visitors using it to enter the nation's capital would never consider it as a destination in and of itself. The large volumes of traffic channeled through the corridor have left vast sections of land vacant and underutilized. The corridor's inhospitable atmosphere discourages private investment. The postwar demolition of neighborhoods in southeast and southwest has contributed to the city's shortage of affordable housing. Addressing the vast range of problems that have resulted from a half-century of well-intentioned but misguided decisions will be as complex and multifaceted as South Capitol Street itself.



New Jersey Avenue between L and M Streets SE

